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At Odds Over Dioxin Hazard in S.F. Bay

■ **Health:** Citing threat to anglers, EPA adds the pollutant to list of contaminants. State says move will mean costly and unnecessary monitoring.

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SAN FRANCISCO—Earl Cousart has been pier-fishing in San Francisco Bay at least twice a week since 1980, reeling in salmon, striped bass and halibut with his buddies year-round. What he catches, Cousart says, he eats. He loves to chop the salmon into a fish stew or fry up the bass.

"But I eat only the migratory fish," Cousart says. "The others, the ones who live in the bay, they're contaminated."

Not far from where Cousart and nearly two dozen other anglers are fishing on a foggy San Francisco morning, signs posted in a half-dozen languages issue a stern warning: "No one should eat more than four meals per month of any striped bass from San Francisco Bay. Women who are pregnant or may soon become pregnant, nursing mothers and children under age six should not eat fish from the area."

Despite the warnings, environmental activists say, hundreds of anglers like Cousart try their luck in the choppy waters every day, and many of them eat striped bass and other heavily contaminated fish several times a week.

With that stubborn determination to eat bay fish in mind, the Environmental Protection Agency this year took the unusual step of overruling state and regional water quality boards and expanding the list of pollutants impairing the water quality of the bay. EPA's Region 9 added dioxins and related compounds to a list that already contained mercury and other contaminants.

Dioxins are highly toxic byproducts of chlorine-based industrial processes and combustion. They are thought to be carcinogenic and to pose other health risks. Dioxins are emitted into the air through combustion in diesel engines, incinerators, refineries and wood-burning fireplaces. There is on-



Despite pollution warnings, anglers pursue their pastime. Some say they eat only migratory fish.

going scientific debate about which of these produces the most dioxin. But all agree that trace amounts fall into the bay or flow there in rivers or storm runoff.

By listing them, the EPA served notice to the state that it must conduct a study of exactly who is producing dioxin, how it is getting into the bay and how to reduce its levels.

Specifically citing the threat that dioxin in fish poses to anglers, the EPA told the state it should make monitoring and reducing dioxin levels "a very high priority."

The EPA's action reignited a debate here between regulators and environmentalists that has occurred across the nation for nearly two decades over just how much of a threat dioxin poses and exactly what can be done about it.

The federal agency's action delighted Bay Area environmentalists. Environmental groups here have for years argued that dioxins pose a serious threat to bay anglers. They have pushed—largely unsuccessfully—for dioxin monitoring and testing, claiming that local oil refineries are largely responsible for dioxin emissions in the Bay Area.

The EPA's listing of dioxin "is an important decision for environmental justice reasons and practical reasons," said Greg Karras, a scientist with Communities for a Better Environment, a Bay Area environmental group that is lobbying to eliminate dioxin from industrial processes. "This is the first time that the EPA declared the bay a high priority for toxic cleanup action specifically to protect subsistence anglers."

But state agencies fear the prohibitive cost and technical difficulty of monitoring dioxin levels and reducing dioxin flows. They also believe the dioxin issue has been overblown by environmentalists.

"You would have to measure an awful lot before you find anything," said Teresa Lee, a spokeswoman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. Her agency has estimated that only 2.4 grams—roughly two teaspoons—of dioxin are entering the Bay Area's atmosphere annually, Lee said.

"A monitoring network for dioxin in the Bay Area would cost about a quarter of a million dollars annually to maintain," Lee said.

The air quality board dismisses environmentalists' claims that refineries and other industries are largely responsible for dioxin emissions. The board estimates that 80% of the dioxin produced in the Bay Area annually comes from emissions from diesel engines and wood-burning fireplaces—a figure disputed by both environmentalists and the EPA.

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"If you wanted to stop dioxin production, you would have to retrofit diesel engines, get people to stop burning wood. It would be a fairly radical change in lifestyles for individuals and incredibly radical for the economy if you want to get rid of diesel engines," Lee said.

Wil Bruhns, senior engineer at the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, said his board is stymied by the EPA's ruling. The EPA seems to expect the water quality control board to do something about dioxins, Bruhns said, but the board can control only discharges into the bay, not air emissions.

"The air people say their legal mandate is to make the air clean," Bruhns said. "They have standards and say there is not a problem with dioxin in the air. It isn't a problem until people eat the fish, which has nothing to do with dioxin in the air."

EPA Regional Administrator Felicia Marcus said she is frustrated by the reaction of state agencies to the EPA ruling.

"Our challenge as leaders at EPA and the state is to pull everybody together and start with the problem and work backward to a solution, rather than point fingers at each other," Marcus said. "This is an issue of tremendous concern, and we're setting it as a very high priority for state regulators to do the study to evaluate the risk and to do the regulations that are needed."

The state began listing San Francisco Bay as a pollutant-impaired water body in 1992. Under the federal Clean Water Act, after the EPA identifies the pollutants that are damaging water quality, state and federal agencies are required to develop studies for each compound and come up with ways to reduce their presence to safe levels.

Marcus said the EPA does not agree with state officials that the primary producers of dioxin are diesel engines and fireplaces.

"Dioxin comes from a lot of places," she said. "We don't know where it is coming from. We don't know enough now, but we have to put our heads together and come up with a plan."

Environmentalists say they are determined to continue pressuring regional water and air quality boards to do something.

"We're certainly going to keep trying to push them to do more to eliminate dioxin," said Michael Lozeau, director of San Francisco BayKeeper, a nonprofit organization that monitors pollution in the bay.

"No one says it is going to be easy to monitor and eliminate dioxin," Lozeau said, "but how much is a life worth? If a few million dollars will get rid of one of the most toxic, carcinogenic pollutants known to humankind, then let's spend it. We can't start having our agencies spending all their time talking about what other agencies should be doing."

But Lee, the water board spokeswoman, said the chances of entirely eliminating dioxin from the bay are slim, because much of the dioxin now found in the water and sediment has been there for decades.

"This is such an incredibly stable compound that even if you stopped existing dioxin production, you would still have a dioxin problem in the bay," Lee said.

Far from the bureaucratic wrangling about dioxin and poisoned fish, Cousart watched with satisfaction as one of his friends gutted a 10-pound salmon Cousart had landed. Tonight, the angler said, it would be fish stew for dinner.

"If I didn't have to work," he said, happy with his catch, "I'd be out here every day."